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ABSTRACT

This brief paper is an anecdotal commentary on a class exercise developed for an advanced European History course covering the period 1815 to the present. It describes a role-play, case-study exercise designed to reinforce previously covered material. Students are directed to attend a mock peace conference to consider if any one country was responsible for starting World War I, if the war might have been prevented, and if different peace treaties might have been written. With the instructor serving as the moderator, students consider each item in a previously prepared position paper. The paper notes that students can gain a sense of satisfaction from mastering some of the complexities of international relations, and that the exercise has been a valuable tool in reinforcing factual material, promoting oral communication, developing research skills, and gaining a different perspective on the course material. Attached is the student handout for the assignment which outlines the background issues and topics for the debate. (CH)

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CASE STUDY AND ROLE-PLAY IN AN ADVANCED HISTORY COURSE

By Patricia Carey Ali, Ph.D.
Morris College

Talk given at the third annual
National HBCU Faculty Development Symposium
Memphis, Tennessee
October 10-13, 1996

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I'm going to start off by admitting "I'm guilty!" In every faculty development workshop speakers always ridicule the legendary professor who pulls out yellowed notes year after year and proceeds to lecture non-stop for fifteen weeks. I'm afraid I'm the one they mean.

My notes are so old, I've attached newspaper clippings that are older than my students! My notes are so old, I used them when my students' parents were in my classes! My notes are so old, the margins are covered with scribbled data and anecdotes so no one else can read them. My notes are so old, I've memorized them and probably don't need them anyway.

I'm not only guilty, I'm unrepentant. I like lectures. I do not intend to change. I teach history, which involves covering vast amounts of factual material, imposing some form or order on random events, identifying subtle relationships, and interpreting diverse opinions. I believe that the lecture method is simply the most efficient and effective way to accomplish these monumental tasks.

A good lecture provides a framework for the course, gives insight for understanding the text, explains nuances which a beginning student might overlook, clarifies the value of seemingly obscure primary sources, identifies the background and biases of secondary sources, poses provocative questions, and stimulates class discussions. In addition, a good lecture demonstrates orderly structure, logical development, and vocabulary in context. Finally, it

teaches much needed listening skills. These are not to be minimized. Successful alumni police detectives, social workers, and teachers have returned to express gratitude for lecture courses where they honed their listening and note-taking skills.

In history courses, lectures, combined with reading assignments and essay-writing, provide a three-pronged consistent, coherent method of examining course material. Nevertheless, an occasional foray into uncoventional territory can add a bit of spice and excitement. History courses are rich in content and provide wonderful material for innovative, creative activities.

I'd like to share one class exercise I've enjoyed developing in an advanced history course. My remarks today are not the product of educational research, but are anecdotal, based on twelve years of experience and observation.

The course, Recent European History (HIS. 317), covers the period 1815 to the present, and has an enrollment of 8 to 25 students per semester. Throughout the course I try to maintain a consistent pattern of readings, lectures and writing experiences. However, the week after the mid-semester exam, we relax and take two or three class periods to review and reconsider basic themes.

World War I tends to be the logical place to stop and tarry a while. Most historians would consider it a watershed event. It represents the culmination of 19th-century nationalism, authoritarianism, imperialism, and technology. The War and subsequent peace treaties laid the foundation for 20th-century rivalries, animosities, dictatorships, economic problems, disputed borders, and security issues. Because of the relevance of these factors to an overall comprehension of the course, I feel justified in sacrificing a week of class time to reworking and rethinking previously studied material.

Over the years I've developed a role-play, case-study exercise designed to reinforce learning. After students have read the textbook, heard the lectures, written an essay, taken a map quiz, and possibly an exam, we embark on some fun. We create a mock peace conference to consider if any one country was responsible for starting World War I, if the war might have been prevented, and if different peace treaties might have been written in 1919.

On the day of the "conference" we arrange the seats in a circle. Each delegation has a sign on the desk indicating the country they represent. Everyone is admonished to stay in character, express the views of their country (not themselves), and act as diplomatically as possible. I serve as moderator, or instigator. We then proceed to consider each of the items on the position paper (see attachment) the students have prepared in advance.

As for evaluation, I consider the exercise comparable to a Brownie "Try-It" badge: if a student submits a decent paper and participates intelligently in the class discussion, he automatically earns an "A" for effort. In subsequent comprehensive exams students generally perform well on the sections dealing with World War I. Although I would love to attribute the higher test grades to effective, innovative teaching methods, they may simply be due to the extra amount of time allotted to the topic.

Beyond grades, though, most students gain a sense of satisfaction from mastering some of the complexities of early 20th-century international relations, appreciating traditional interests of European states, the multiplicity of events, the interrelationship of political, military and cultural factors, and discovering debating talents they might not have realized (assertiveness, verbal self-defensse, witty rejoinders, thinking on their feet, passionate espousal of a position not necessarily their own).

It is also an opportunity to stimulate class spirit by creating a memorable moment of

classmates impersonating diplomats, acting with feigned truculence, formalized courtesy, European accents, and ambassadorial manners.

The success of the exercise depends, of course, on the preparation of each student. If one person is not adequately prepared, the whole class suffers. If teams do not collaborate effectively, the shortcoming is very apparent.

Nevertheless, this role-play, case-study exercise has proven to be a valuable tool to reinforce factual material, promote oral communication, develop research skills, and gain a different perspective on the course.

HISTORY 317 -- RECENT EUROPE

WORLD WAR I CLASS ACTIVITY -- DIPLOMATIC CONFERENCE

A peace conference has been organized to discuss the causes and results of World War I. The purpose is to ascertain if any one state was responsible for starting the war, if war might have been averted in 1914, and if the peace treaties resolved the problems that contributed to World War I.

With these questions in mind, choose one of the following countries to represent at the peace conference: Russia, Britain, Germany, France, Serbia, Ottoman Empire, Austria-Hungary, Italy.

With your team prepare written answers to the questions outlined below. Research the answers using the textbook and monographs in the library. In class your team will be asked to debate the issues with other teams.

Background issues and topics for debate

1. Identify the national interests of your country.

   a) List three (3) main concerns necessary for your country's survival.
   b) List two (2) ambitions your would like to achieve and identify the country (or countries) that would block these ambitions.
   c) Explain what solutions you would like to see in each of these problem areas: Balkans, Straits, imperialism, international trade, arms race.

2. Identify your friends (allies) and enemies.

   a) State the alliances you have joined, the date of the alliance and the other members of the alliance(s).
   b) Identify your major rivals and the reason(s) for that rivalry.

3. Examine the long-term and immediate causes of World War I and justify your country's diplomacy.

   a) Identify the country (or countries) whom you blame for starting the war. Explain the reasons why they are to blame.
   b) State three(3) reasons why others have blamed your country for starting the war.
   c) Prepare a defense against the charges that your country was responsible for starting the war.

4. Examine the provisions of the peace treaties (Versailles, Trianon, Sèvres, Neuilly).

   a) Identify five (5) provisions that your country favors and explain why.
   b) Identify three (3) provisions of which your country disapproves and explain why.